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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses three emerging national trends that could serve as catalysts for fundamental change in student services programs. First is the concept of the learning organization, which offers a superior model for enhancing the effectiveness of institutions and the people within them. Second is the movement away from standardization and uniformity toward greater personalization and individualization of services in both the private and public sectors. Third is the pervasiveness and power of technology and its effect on standard operating procedures in all areas of life. The authors maintain that if student services programs learn to function as a critical component of a learning organization, if they focus on providing more personalized services, and if they capitalize on the potential of more technology, they will undergo significant changes between now and 2021. (Contains 18 references.) (GCP)

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The Student Support Team as a Professional Learning Community

By

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Chapter Two

The Student Support Team as a Professional Learning Community

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Predicting the future is always risky business. Consider the following predictions:

> "When the Paris Exhibition closes, electric light will close with it and no more will be heard of it."
> —Erasmus Wilson, Oxford University, 1878

> "Heavier than air flying machines are impossible."
> —William Thomson (Lord Kelvin), President of the Royal Society, 1895

> "There is not the slightest indication that nuclear energy will ever be obtainable."
> —Albert Einstein, 1932

> "I think there is a world market for about five computers."
> —Thomas Watson, founder of IBM, 1943

> "You ain't going nowhere, son—you ought to go back to driving a truck."
> —Jim Denver, manager of the Grand Ole Opry, to Elvis Presley, 1954

If prognostication is fraught with difficulty in general, anticipating the future of public schools and their programs in tumultuous times is particularly challenging. The ability of public schools to engage in significant, fundamental change is

increasingly being called into question. In his review of the research on school innovation, David Perkins (1992, p. 205) arrived at the "profoundly discouraging" conclusion that "almost all educational innovations fail in the long term." Thus, research would seem to support the argument that the schools of the future are likely to look very much like schools of the present.

Another perspective, offered both by friends and foes of public schools alike, predicts the imminent demise of public education. Phil Schlechty (1997, p. ix) is among the school reformers who warn educators that unless they move quickly to transform their schools in dramatic ways, "public schools will not be a vital component of America's system of education in the twenty-first century." The president of the Kettering Foundation echoed that sentiment when he wrote: "The research forces me to say something that I never thought I would say—or even think. The public school system as we know it may not survive into the next century" (Matthews, 1997, p. 741).

There is a third possibility—the possibility that public schools will neither remain as they are nor become extinct, but will undergo fundamental changes. While we acknowledge that this transformation is not inevitable, we do believe that it is possible. Furthermore, student services programs can be affected by and contribute to this transformation.

Three emerging national trends could serve as a catalyst for fundamental change in student services programs. First, throughout most of the twentieth century, the industrial model has dominated American thinking about organizational development. There is now growing recognition, however, that the concept of the learning organization offers a superior model for enhancing the effectiveness of institutions and the people within them. Second, there is a movement away from standardization and uniformity toward greater personalization and individualization of services in both the private and public sectors. Third, the pervasiveness and power of technology are changing standing operating procedures in all areas of life. If student services programs learn to function as a critical component of a learning organization, if they focus on providing more personalized services, and if they capitalize on the potential of technology, they will undergo significant changes between now and 2021.

The School as a Learning Organization

American schools were organized according to the concepts and principles of the prevalent organizational model of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—the factory model. This model was based on the premise that one best system could be identified to complete any task or solve any organizational problem. It was management's job to identify the one best way, to train workers accordingly, and then to provide the supervision and monitoring to ensure that workers would follow the prescribed methods. Thus, a small group of people could do the thinking for the entire organization. The model demanded centralization, standardization, hierarchical management, a rigid sense of time, and accountability based on adherence to the system.

Schools were designed to mirror the same characteristics, and the factory model in traditional public schools is still much in evidence today. Schools continue to focus on procedures rather than results, following the assumption that if they adhere to the rules—teaching the prescribed curriculum, maintaining the correct class sizes, using the appropriate textbooks, helping students accumulate the right number of course credits, and following district procedures—students will learn what is intended. Little attention is paid to determining whether the learning has actually taken place. Schools remain preoccupied with time and design, organizing the class period, school day, and school year according to rigid schedules that must be followed. Teachers and their opinions are still considered insignificant in many schools. It is left to the *thinkers* of the organization to specify what is to be taught and then to provide the supervision to ensure that teachers do as they are told. Student services personnel typically have even less autonomy and are expected simply to apply uniform policies and procedures rather than use their professional judgment.

The factory model may have served schools well when they were not intended to educate large numbers of students to a high level. The fact that large numbers of students dropped out of school prior to graduation or failed to develop essential skills was not viewed as a cause for great alarm as long as these students had ready access to unskilled jobs in industry regardless of their educational level. But the decline of unskilled jobs in industry and the arrival of the information age have left schools with a model that is ill-equipped to bring students to the high

levels of learning necessary to function as productive citizens in the twenty-first century.

The incongruity of the factory model assumptions with the demands on contemporary public education has led to a growing movement to bring the principles of a learning organization to schools. Consider the following:

> Organizations that build in continuous learning in jobs will dominate the twenty-first century. (Drucker, 1992, p. 108)
>
> The most successful corporation of the future will be a learning organization. (Senge, 1990, p. 4)
>
> The new problem of change . . . is what would it take to make the educational system a learning organization—expert at dealing with change as a normal part of its work, not just in relation to the latest policy, but as a way of life. (Fullan, 1993, p. 4)
>
> The Commission recommends that schools be restructured to become genuine learning organizations for both students and teachers; organizations that respect learning, honor teaching, and teach for understanding. (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996, p. 198)
>
> We have come to realize over the years that the development of a learning community of educators is itself a major cultural change that will spawn many others. (Joyce & Showers, 1995, p. 3)
>
> If schools want to enhance their organizational capacity to boost student learning, they should work on building a professional community. (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995, p. 37)
>
> We argue, however, that when schools attempt significant reform, efforts to form a schoolwide professional community are critical. (Louis, Kruse, & Raywid, 1996, p. 13)

Rarely has research given school practitioners such a consistent message and clear sense of direction. Now those practitioners face the challenge of bringing the characteristics of a learning organization to life in their schools. Those characteristics include:

1. clarity of purpose, shared vision, collective commitments and values, and common goals;
2. collaborative teams engaged in collective inquiry;
3. a focus on results; and
4. a structure and culture that fosters continuous improvement.

Let's examine each of these areas to identify how the student support team of the future can help transform traditional schools into learning communities.

Laying the Foundation of a Learning Organization

Because student services departments of the future will function as learning organizations, they will attend to the four questions that serve as the foundation or building blocks of such organizations. The first of these questions, "Why do we exist?" will challenge members of the department to reflect upon and articulate the fundamental purpose or mission of the department. Addressing this question is the first step in clarifying priorities, giving direction to members of the department, and establishing a results orientation. Clarity of purpose and a willingness to work together in the pursuit of that purpose are essential to a learning organization.

The second issue that student services departments will address is the question of what the department hopes to become, or its vision of its future. Department members will work collaboratively in an effort to describe in detail how they will "look" in the future. They will visualize themselves in action and develop a compelling, attractive future for the department toward which they are committed to working. This clearly articulated, shared vision will identify ideals and establish benchmarks that enable members of the department to be proactive in their work with students, parents, and teachers. Furthermore, this vision for the department will complement and reinforce both the vision that has been developed for the school and the effort to articulate the knowledge, dispositions, and characteristics the school hopes to develop in each student. In short, the student services department of the future will be more effective in achieving results because it will have taken the

time to identify the results it is striving to obtain in a credible, compelling shared vision.

The third building block, collective commitments or values, challenges members of the student services department to consider the attitudes, behaviors, and commitments they must demonstrate in order to achieve their shared vision. *Vision* describes aspirations of a desired future state, and *values* describe commitments that people are prepared to make today. The focus of these value statements will be internal rather than external. Instead of citing the deficiencies in students, parents, teachers, society, and so forth, or engaging in the "if only" approach to school improvement ("if only our load were cut in half, then we could do the job"), each member of the student services team will concentrate on what he or she can do to advance the department as it works to better serve students.

The fourth building block that will be in evidence when a department is functioning as a learning organization is developing clear and specific goals. The goals building block raises the questions, "which steps will we take, when will we take them, and how will we measure their impact?" Although this may appear to be the most pragmatic component of the building blocks, goals can contribute to the creation of a learning organization only if they are built upon the three precursors. Furthermore, the identification of clear, measurable, ambitious performance goals represents a critical link to another characteristic of a learning organization—effective collaborative teams (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993).

When the members of a student services department have seriously discussed these questions and arrived at consensus on answers to each question, they will have established the foundation of a learning organization. Although much work will remain if the department is to be transformed, that work will have the benefit of a solid foundation.

Collaborative Teams Engaged in Collective Inquiry

Collaborative teams have been described as "the basic building block of the intelligent organization" (Pinchot & Pinchot, 1993, 66), the "essence of a learning organization" (Dilworth, 1993, 252), and "the critical component for every enterprise—the predominant unit for decision making and getting things done" (Senge, Ross, Smith, Roberts, & Kleiner, 1994, 354). The student services department of the future will recognize that no one staff member can or should hope to meet all the complex

needs of students through isolated, individual efforts. Therefore the department will be organized into collaborative work teams that might include counselors, social workers, and deans. These teams will engage in ongoing collective inquiry in at least three areas: the success and well-being of individual students, the effectiveness of programs in meeting the needs of each student, and the effectiveness of the team itself.

Focusing on the Individual Student

The success and well-being of each student will be the primary focus of the student support department of the future. Each member of the team will have instant access to every student on the team's caseload, including each student's grades, progress reports, participation in activities, attendance, discipline referrals and consequences, anecdotal records, goals, four-year plans, parent information, and so forth. The teams will conduct weekly meetings and engage in informal daily contact regarding their students because regular, ongoing communication is the lifeblood of effective teams. The team will develop procedures and systems to monitor each student, will respond promptly to any student who requires additional support, and will work collaboratively to develop an individualized plan for students who are struggling in the standard program. Some of the questions that will drive the collective inquiry of the team might include the following:

- Has the student identified his or her goals?
- Is the student achieving his or her goals and reaching his or her potential through the existing program?
- Is there evidence that this student is having difficulty or needs additional support?
- Would the student benefit from a different program?
- What can we do to meet the needs of this student better?

Assessing the Effectiveness of Programs

A learning community is characterized by a perpetual disquiet, a constant search for a better way. Thus, student services teams will engage in an ongoing assessment of the programs that are in place to meet the needs of students. The goal of this assessment is to develop multiple programs and interventions that respond to the diverse needs of students. Rather than focusing on molding students to fit existing programs, the team will focus on developing programs to meet the individual needs of students. Questions that will drive the collective inquiry of

the team might include the following:

- Do existing programs meet the needs of all students?
- What evidence are we monitoring to ensure that students' needs are being met?
- Are the monitoring systems sufficiently comprehensive?
- How can we use input from students, faculty, and parents to develop more effective programs?
- How can we improve upon the results we are currently getting?

Assessing the Effectiveness of the Team

The student services team will demonstrate the following characteristics of effective teams: Members will be guided by shared purpose, will clarify each member's role and responsibilities, will articulate operational norms or protocols for working together, will establish meeting formats and agendas, will identify specific performance goals, and will agree upon the criteria they will use in assessing the achievement of those goals. Furthermore, they will engage in ongoing discussions and assessments of the functioning of the team itself. Questions that will drive the collective inquiry of the team might include the following:

- Are we truly functioning as a team?
- Are we maintaining an appropriate balance between advocacy for our individual positions and inquiry regarding the thinking of others on the team?
- Have we clarified and are we fulfilling our individual and collective responsibilities?
- Do we need to meet more frequently?
- Do we need to expand our membership or work with other teams?
- Are we achieving our goals?
- How can we be more effective as a team?

A student support team at work is illustrated in the following scenario.

> A high school counselor visits the support team of a junior high school in late spring to review the status of students who will be assigned to that counselor's team as they enter the high school in the fall. One of the entering freshman boys has been identified by the junior high school team as a student who may have

difficulty with the transition to high school. He has a history of poor academic achievement and has demonstrated some social-emotional issues.

Upon returning to the high school, the counselor reviews the student's records and the anecdotal observations of the junior high school staff with the other members of his student support team, a social worker, and the dean. The team decides to recommend a specialized summer school program on study skills for the student. Team members also conclude that assigning the student to a small, monitored study hall with an instructor who teaches study strategies would benefit the student during the school year. The counselor contacts the student and his parents and invites them to come to the school to discuss the upcoming transition to high school. The student works with the counselor and parents to articulate his goals for high school. The parents agree that the summer school class may be beneficial and enroll their son in the program. They also endorse the small study hall for their son.

The student has a successful summer school session and begins the regular school year. The student support team discusses him at their first meeting of the year. Team members delegate monitoring responsibilities to assess his transition to high school as well as his success in his classes. Teachers are asked to provide weekly updates on the school's computerized system for monitoring grades and behavior. At a subsequent meeting, the student support team discusses the student's progress and determines that he needs more support. The counselor contacts the parents and advises them of the team's recommendations. With the parents' approval, the counselor and social worker invite the student to attend a support group for freshman, and he is moved to a more intensive study skills program where a teacher not only monitors each student's homework, but also provides ongoing communication with parents, teachers, and the student support team. The counselor arranges for tutoring for the student before school to help him complete missing assignments. The counselor also convinces the student to join the stage crew for the upcoming fall play. The

student begins to show improvement that is noted at the next meeting of the support team. The team decides he would benefit from some positive reinforcement. They convene a meeting with his teachers and parents and congratulate him on his improvement. The team invites ideas as to what might be done to help the student maintain his success. As time goes on, the student and his progress are continually assessed, new strategies are developed and implemented as needed, and the cycle continues.

It has been said that schools foster a culture of isolation, but the student services department of the future will be characterized by a culture of collaboration. Teams will work with teachers, students, and parents in an ongoing effort to monitor the success of each student, the effectiveness of the school's programs, and the effectiveness of the team itself. They will be relentless in their efforts to promote conditions that support the success of each student.

A Focus on Results

The primary reason for becoming a learning community is to achieve dramatically better results for each student. Student services personnel must be relentless in their efforts to assess the needs of each student; to identify the barriers and obstacles that interfere with student success; and to work with students, parents, the student support team, and faculty to develop strategies for overcoming those barriers. Most important, they must assess their efforts on the basis of results rather than intentions. In many schools, the contemporary counselor is not called upon to present evidence of effectiveness. In others, counselors cite the number of programs they have initiated or the amount of student and parent contact they have had as evidence of their success. But the student services program of the future will insist that the effectiveness of the department be assessed on the basis of student success. Efforts and initiatives will be subjected to ongoing assessment on the basis of tangible results.

The American School Counselor Association (1997) has articulated the results student services programs should seek in the National Standards for School Counseling Programs. These standards include the areas of academic, career, and personal and social development:

Academic Development

Standard A: Students will acquire the attitudes, knowledge, and skills that contribute to effective learning in school and across their life span.

Standard B: Students will complete school with the academic preparation essential to choose from a wide range of substantial post-secondary options, including college.

Standard C: Students will understand the relationship of academics to the world of work and to life at home and in the community.

Career Development

Standard A: Students will acquire the skills to investigate the world of work in relation to knowledge of self, and to make informed career decisions.

Standard B: Students will employ strategies to achieve future career success and satisfaction.

Standard C: Students will understand the relationships among personal qualities, education and training, and the world of work.

Personal-Social Development

Standard A: Students will acquire the attitudes, knowledge, and interpersonal skills to help them understand and respect others.

Standard B: Students will make decisions, set goals, and take the necessary actions to achieve goals.

Standard C: Students will understand safety and survival skills.

A Commitment to Continuous Improvement

Articulating results is a critical step in developing the results orientation of a learning community, but the ongoing monitoring of the desired results is equally important. In most organizations, what gets monitored gets done. As Phil Schlechty (1997, p. 111) observes, "People know what is expected by what is inspected and respected . . . evaluation and assessment, properly conceived, are key elements in building . . . a result-oriented, self-regulating environment." The student services department that is serious about improving its programs' effectiveness will move beyond articulating desired results. Its members will identify indicators that offer evidence of improvement, will develop systems to

monitor those indicators on a continual basis, and will revise programs and procedures based on their ongoing analysis of the information they are gathering. This monitoring will go beyond the traditional tracking of credits toward graduation to include examining trends in grades; analyzing student performance on state and national tests; helping the student to develop and implement academic and career goals, and complete career exploration programs; administering personality, attitude, and learning style inventories; ensuring student participation in cocurricular activities and service projects; administering student satisfaction surveys, parent satisfaction surveys, and faculty satisfaction surveys; reviewing discipline and attendance records; and encouraging students to write reflections on their school experience as they approach graduation. Because many of the goals of a student services department extend beyond graduation, it is imperative that the monitoring process include follow-up studies of graduates. These studies might include annual focus groups of randomly selected alumni to discuss their level of satisfaction with the preparation their school has given them and their identification of areas needing improvement. It might also include a phone survey of randomly selected students one year and five years after their graduation to assess their school experience.

This constant monitoring will be driven by the department's commitment to continuous improvement. While members will take time to celebrate evidence of improvement, they will be characterized by a persistent disquiet with the status quo and a constant search for more effective ways to achieve the desired results. They will recognize that becoming a professional learning community represents not a project to complete, but a way of conducting their day-to-day business, forever.

Technology

As our world moves through the twenty-first century, it will continue to become increasingly technologically advanced. Internet connections will be as ubiquitous as telephone lines. All educators, even those in the most remote parts of our country, will be connected to others using voice mail, electronic mail, and the Internet. Students in the year 2021 will be able to interact with multimedia devices, computer simulations, and virtual reality and obtain information from experts in any field in any nation. Interactive programs will offer virtual experiences of

historical events (Cornish, 1996). Technology will bring cooperative learning to a global scale. Schools will be linked so that students in rural Iowa will be able to "attend" a lecture given by a history professor in Great Britain using Internet-based videoconferencing. If teenagers in the most remote part of Siberia are curious about life in an American city, they will be able to e-mail students in Chicago, obtain virtual tours of the neighborhoods, and learn about the city's past through digital video and imaging. Conversations with other teenagers will be instantaneously translated into their own language.

There are those that contend that the availability of technology will make the educator and the student services department obsolete, that children from a very early age will be able to learn from a computer at home and will never again set foot in a school building. We disagree with that prediction. Although technology will be an integral part of the professional learning organization, adolescents will continue to have a developmental need to experience success, build relationships, gain social experiences, and increase in emotional maturity. Students in the future will continue to require one-on-one guidance, supervision, and personal discussion, and student services personnel will be positioned to fill this need.

Counselors in the professional learning environment of 2021 will use technology to track instantaneous information about their students and their students' learning progress throughout their academic career. Students will have individualized education plans that begin when they are very young, and the information about how they learn most effectively will travel with them throughout their academic development. Strengths will be capitalized on as weaknesses are addressed. Annual goals will be set for each person, and all members of the school community will assist students in achieving their potential. Students will enter each phase of schooling with a plan that will be continually reviewed and modified as the student matures.

The student services department of the future will use technology to its greatest potential as well. Time and distance will no longer limit the work that people do. Imagine the following scenario that illustrates the student services department of the future at work:

> Sandy is a student who has been a hard worker and has done very well in school for the past 11 years. She has been a model student, earning the praise of her

parents and teachers. She has always seemed to motivate herself, asking for help when she needs it and taking advantage of the educational opportunities around her. Sandy is now at the end of her junior year. Last week, Sandy's wireless Personal Digital Assistant alerted her that she had received three grades in math and two grades in English below her 94% average. The system displayed the trend and suggested helpwork (teacher-planned additional curriculum) to assist her in improving her performance. Even with the additional assistance, however, Sandy's lower performance continues and the system notifies her counselor, Mr. Reed.

Mr. Reed reviews Sandy's performance report and discusses Sandy's performance with her English and math teachers. They note that there had been a gradual decline in her grades and a change in her attitude toward her coursework. Although she hasn't ignored her assignments, she has not been working up to her usual standards. She seems somewhat depressed and anxious about something, but she has not responded to any of the questions that concerned faculty asked her.

Mr. Reed confers with the other members of Sandy's student support team to see if any other problems have surfaced and to collaborate on possible solutions. The team decides to have Mr. Reed meet with Sandy to investigate her recent downward trend and her change in attitude. Sandy talks openly with Mr. Reed, and he discovers that she is apprehensive about college and what she will do there. The career and vocational assessment system had analyzed her educational history, grade level portfolios, personality, and learning style and suggested several career fields in which she might be successful, but she is still anxious about what college and the future hold for her. While Mr. Reed is talking to Sandy, Ms. White, Sandy's social worker, videoconferences with Sandy's parents to see if they have noticed any difference in their daughter and to see if anything is going on in the family that might explain the sudden change. Sandy's parents express a concern that they have seen the same change in their daughter and are not sure what may be the cause. Every

time they ask, she says she is nervous about college, but she never elaborates. The team is able to confer once again and decides to hold a meeting with Sandy, her parents, and her teachers.

Mr. Reed instructs his Personal Digital Assistant to coordinate a meeting with all the interested parties. The system compares the schedules of the invited persons and finds a time slot when they are free to meet. The Personal Digital Assistant then schedules the room and alerts the invited parties of the meeting place and time. At the meeting, Sandy's teachers express their concerns about her schoolwork, and the team explores Sandy's anxiety about the future. Instead of waiting for Sandy's parents to come to school, the team and teachers are able to meet that afternoon with Sandy's mother and father through a videoconference that Sandy attends.

Sandy apologizes to the group but admits that she is extremely anxious about college. She has never visited a school and is worried that she will not be able to succeed in the colleges to which she has decided to apply. Her parents express their frustration that they do not have the time or the money to visit every college that interests Sandy. If she were able to narrow down her choices to one or two colleges, personal visits to the colleges would be more realistic. The team brainstorms with the family to find ways to get Sandy back on track and to help alleviate Sandy's anxiety about college. Sandy agrees to visit the paraprofessional tutor for help with English and math for the next few days after school. Her teachers feel this will give her a chance to succeed again in these classes. They agree to send e-mails to the student support team to update them on Sandy's progress.

Mr. Reed also makes an appointment for Sandy to come into the office during her lunch period to take an in-depth virtual tour of the two universities in which she is most interested. He shows her how to investigate the major options, the admission requirements, and the different buildings on campus. He also demonstrates how to access a video chat room in order to speak with students and faculty. Sandy videoconferences with an admissions officer to ask questions about the admission process. Sandy finds that this combination of virtual

tours, chat rooms, and videoconferences is very informative, and she decides to use it to explore other universities. Gradually her concerns begin to diminish.

As this example illustrates, the student services department of the future will respond to problems immediately. They will quickly spot and address a downward trend. Time and distance will be less of a hindrance in problem solving, and all concerned parties will be able to participate in the education of a child. Technology will not eliminate the need for student services personnel but instead will be a powerful tool in helping them to be more effective in helping all students achieve their goals.

Conclusion

There will be those who contend that this description of the student services department of the future lacks imagination and does not represent a radical departure from current best practice. There is some validity to that criticism, but we feel that our image presents a good news–bad news message to practitioners. The good news is that the best programs have already begun to move in this direction and are demonstrating many of the characteristics we describe in this chapter. The bad news is that although best practice is acknowledged, very few schools actually implement that practice. It is a mistake to wait for the passage of time or for some act of divine intervention to transform student services programs. Those who want a decidedly more effective program in the year 2021 will begin the hard work of implementing best practice today. Time won't change our departments; we will have to do it ourselves, and there is no reason to wait.

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Patricia Martin, Debbie Magee, Aida Guidice, and Barbara Zivkovic were members of the Student Services Department of Stevenson High School who helped to build the pyramid of interventions that has become a model for providing students experiencing difficulties with additional time and support. **Patricia Martin** and **Debbie Magee** continue to serve in leadership roles in Stevenson's Student Services Department. **Aida Guidice** is now director of pupil personnel service for Bartlett High School in Bartlett, Illinois. **Barbara Zivkovic** is a counselor at Lake Forest High School in Lake County, Illinois. To learn more about the nationally-recognized program of Stevenson High School contact Debra Magee at dmagee@district125.k12.il.us or visit the Stevenson website at www.district125.k12.il.us